

# COLUMNISTS

## Columnist passes reading list on for posterity

In the late '60s, when I was a high-school upperclassman and then a college freshman, providence provided me with two exceptional English teachers. Both were priests of the Archdiocese of Baltimore; both were eccentrics; each gave me a verbal licking at a time when I badly needed it; neither could stand the other (one of the first peremptory instructions I received from the college teacher was to throw the high-school teacher's notes away).

More to the immediate point, each of these men, now long dead, loved good books and good writing, and taught both with insight and a kind of literary ferocity.

Given such exemplary tutelage it now strikes me as odd that I abandoned novels for almost 20 years. But in the latter part of the '80s, I began to read the 19th and 20th century classics with enormous pleasure, thereby discovering the truth in the old saw that everyone should be allowed to take high-school or college English all over again, 25 years later.

Why was I 45 before I learned that *Huckleberry Finn* is a masterpiece of humor? Did historical coincidence prove overly suggestive (I was engrossed in *The Bostonians* during the first Clinton inauguration) — or hadn't Henry James painted a minutely-detailed portrait of Hillary Rodham Clinton when he created Olive



BY GEORGE WEIGEL

the catholic difference

Chancellor in 1886? Character for character, and insight for insight, has a better novel than George Eliot's *Middlemarch* ever been written?

Reading lists are a summer staple, so with delayed but affectionate gratitude toward the crotchety geniuses who laid the foundation for my appreciation of such treasures, I offer a few possibilities (in addition to those just named) for brave souls willing to challenge the hegemony of Danielle Steele in the summer of 1997.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, by Willa Cather — Arguably the finest novel ever written about Catholicism in the United States. Get the Library of America edition; it includes Cather's deft reply to the editors of *Commonweal*, who had asked her how someone not a Catholic had come to write about the church and its

people so insightfully.

*The Age of Innocence*, by Edith Wharton — Forget the Michelle Pfeiffer/Winton Ryder movie, its sweated sense of elegance, and its implicit whining about "repression." This is a novel about the superiority of fidelity over transient passion, with a depth of insight into the dynamics of marriage that Hollywood is ontologically incapable of matching.

*The Leopard*, by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa — OK, OK, it's the great modern Italian novel, but Archibald Colquhoun's translation is masterful, and Lampedusa had a singular perception of what was lost when traditional societies crumbled under the irresistible pressures of modernity.

*The Richard Trilogy* by Paul Horgan — The first volume of the three, *Things As They Are*, is the best thing written about a boy growing up since Mark Twain. The entire trilogy, by one of America's finest, and most underrated, contemporary writers, breathes a sacramental sensibility about the world and the flesh that is never cloying and that illustrates why "universal" is a synonym for "Catholic."

*The Princess Casamassima*, by Henry James — A merciless dissection of the follies of revolutionary chic, written 80 years before Tom Wolfe deconstructed

Leonard Bernstein's cocktail party for the Black Panthers.

*Nostramo*, by Joseph Conrad — Technically challenging, but a psychological investigation into Latin American political culture that retains, alas, a lot of salience today.

The "Richard Hannay" novels of John Buchan — No one will accuse *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *Greenmantle*, *Mr. Standfast*, *The Three Hostages* and *The Island of Sheep* of being world-class literature. But they're great stories (especially for boys). Read them to discover what the world was like before moral relativism was thought to be a — no, the — civilized attitude.

*A Handful of Dust*, by Evelyn Waugh — A less self-indulgent, more tightly-crafted novel than *Brideshead Revisited*, and a brilliant evocation of what happens when the (admittedly difficult) ethic celebrated by *The Age of Innocence* becomes impossibly old-hat.

*The Warden* and *Barchester Towers*, by Anthony Trollope — Acid-free ecclesiastical satire. If you can get through any 10 pages of *Barchester Towers* without laughing out loud, consult your physician and your confessor — something is wrong.

Enjoy.

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## Life's questions make us all theologians

In one sense, every believer is a theologian. This is especially true considering St. Anselm's famous definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding." Faith *does* seek to understand itself. We can appreciate this from our own lives, probably even from when we were children, and certainly as adults.

Faith's quest for understanding comes in many forms. Today we know, for example, that a major question for faith involves human suffering. Because of the communications network we are aware of events and conditions all over the world, more than at any other period in history. Thus we know that the earth is populated by vast numbers of people (by some accounts two-thirds of the world's population) whose very existence is thwarted by extreme conditions of poverty, oppression and misery.

This situation, to say the least, appears to be inconsistent with some basic tenets of our faith, especially core beliefs that maintain that God loves everyone and calls us to eternal happiness that begins right here on earth.

So a good example of "faith seeking understanding" can be the questions that arise when we witness great suffering:



BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

the moral life

How can God allow this to happen if, as our faith proclaims, God loves us? How can God let the people he loves suffer, if God is, as our faith teaches, all-powerful?

The experience of human suffering provokes the sort of questioning that shows all of us to be theologians. Obviously, we come to various "resolutions." And over a single lifetime, the question likely receives different resolutions even by a single individual.

At one stage, we may be content with an explanation that some forms of suffering can be a factor leading some people to greater depth of appreciation for life. It can become a catalyst in some lives for greater growth and development.

At other times, though, awareness of

the breadth of human suffering might invite the same individual to take up an activity aimed at diminishing or even alleviating human suffering. Many Catholics contribute time and talents in soup kitchens and other outreaches that attempt to lessen human suffering and its effects. They might adopt such a practice because of a new realization that God does not, after all, "will" human suffering at all, but wills that we all work to relieve the conditions that cause us to suffer. Thus, the same question can provoke different responses — even in a single life.

There can surely be no conclusion in this column to the basic question about how human suffering relates to God's love or intervention on our behalf! But the issue illustrates how, for all of us, our faith does indeed seek understanding.

We are all theologians in the sense that as we undergo the dual experience of hearing our faith proclaimed and proceeding through the stages of our lives, questions emerge that invite us on a quest that we cannot avoid. For all of us, faith "seeks understanding." And as we all know, our questioning in matters of faith can lead to a deepening of the beliefs we hold, and to a more mature, liv-

ing acceptance of what the church teaches and proclaims.

Arriving at "different answers" at different stages of life need not be a frightening experience, but is most often an enriching one. Today in our parishes and throughout the diocese there are many opportunities to help us take advantage of our natural status as "theologians." In fact, we recall that the highest priority of the Synod initiatives related to our quest for more opportunities to help us understand our faith.

Many parishes today provide libraries to help us; adult education programs include formal classes on particular themes; Catholic publications can be subscribed to; Bible studies are helpful to many; parish staff members can help us; Catholics we know and trust can serve as resources for us.

A faith that is alive will be a faith that pursues greater understanding all through life. The quest for deeper faith can take on great importance in life; it is almost impossible to know what activity can be of more importance!

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